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Serge Clement & Marina Kamena: 'Preserving Post-Modern Pop'

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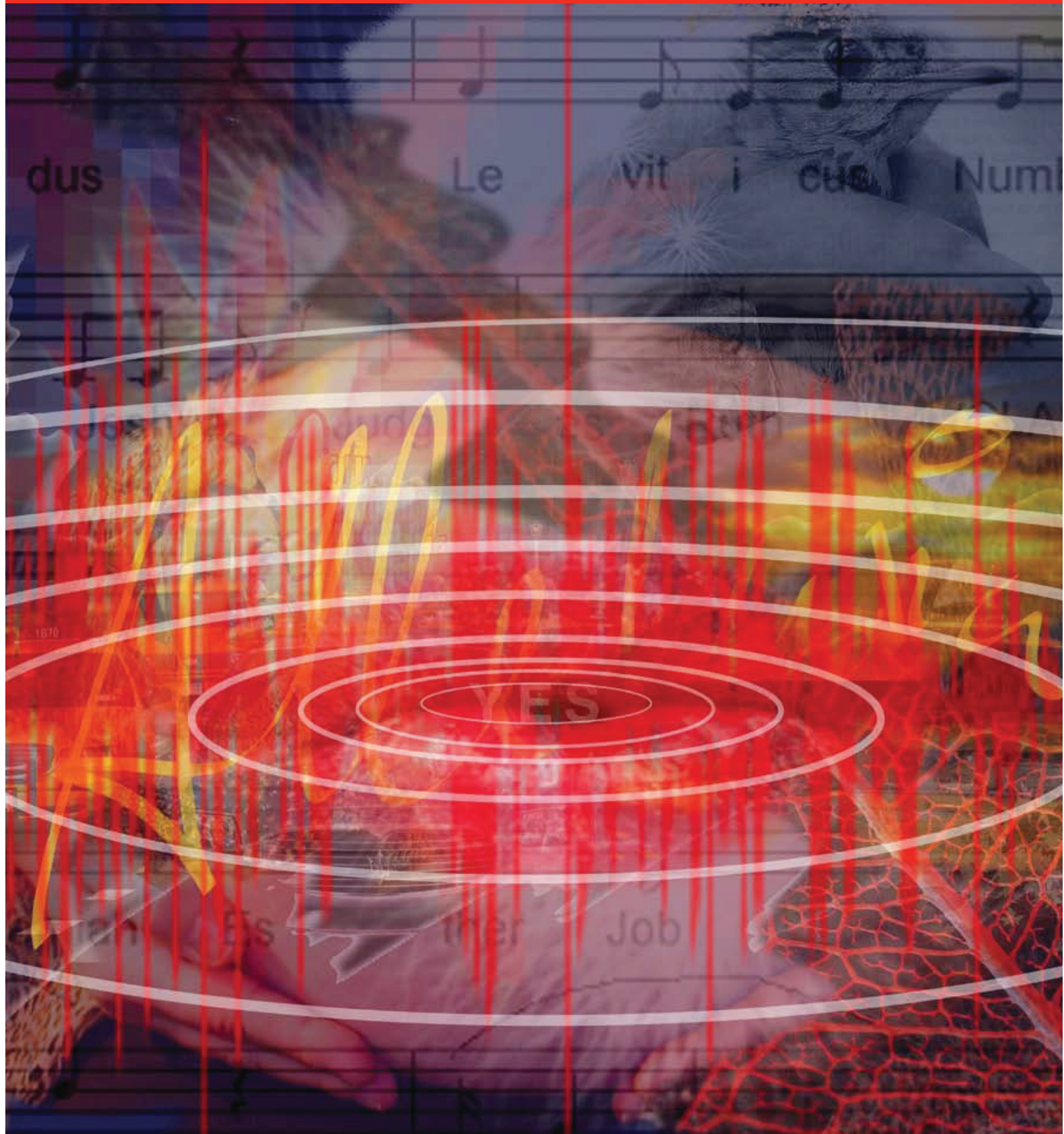
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CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

13

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Reference: René Magritte: *Les Marches de L'été*Reference: Pissanello: *Portrait of a Princess*

Serge Clement & Marina Kamena: 'Preserving' Post-Modern Pop

by Philip Eliasoph, Senior Arts Editor

Entertaining a steady stream of creative colleagues, literary types, and loyal patrons at their Westport home-studio, the artistic duo of Serge Clement and Marina Kamena are usually at the eye of a cultural hurricane. More like stopping in at a little thatched cottage village refuge out in the Loire valley, we enter an imitably art salon milieu.

Unsuspecting first time diners think they are being well fed: veterans know they are being gorged by an inexorably moveable feast of artistic abundance. Well after the *vin rouge* carafes have been emptied, we sneak down into the secret subterranean studio. Wonders continue – like peeking into the magical sets for Georges Méliès' "*Le Voyage dans Le Lune*." [recently revived in Scorsese's award-winning "*Hugo*"]. It's all intoxicatingly, joy-

ously, and deliciously: à la française.

While hostess Marina [she's from a family displaced by Tito's goon squads in the former Yugoslavia] ushers us around various gallery-like rooms, Serge dons his chef's apron finishing off his preparation of some bivouacs. He's partial to pearl-like oysters prepared in the customary manner of Brittany which he attends while lording over various pots with simmering sauce for a succulently prepared lamb roast.

Let's not be blasé. The fact that this cosmopolitan couple also make head-spinning, jaw-dropping fine art completes this picture. We are not in the midst of those who either pose or propose to artists. This is most definitely how artists live, think, imagine – and as a sideline, invent first-class gourmand delicacies.

Arriving like Lafayette to help conquer America's hearts and minds, Clement & Kamena are a delightful, beguiling, and enchanting addition to our regional arts community. With the diplomatic assistance of important local supporters, they made their trans-atlantic passage, finding Westport in 2000 as their permanent residence.

Two years earlier they created 10 perfect renderings as the scenography for Charles Maillon's bio-pic on "Rembrandt." With remarkable verisimilitude, they literally painted in the faces of the starring actors into the Rembrandt paintings as perfect matches. Yes they are a married couple. No, they won't divulge who does what part of each art project. Secrets are kept for pillow-talk.

No wonder New York Times art critic Grace Glueck opened her critique exclaiming

Reference: Rubens: *The Massacre of Innocents*Reference: Ingres: *Le Bain Turc*

"over the top we go," with these boundlessly imaginative artists. And just in time for the geraniums and hydrangeas to bloom in Connecticut's earthly paradise, they are opening their latest series: "The Jar Memory Project" at Southport Galleries for June and July.

Take a simple object – how about the generic trademark of the Mason Ball Jar, patented by the Philadelphia tinsmith, James Landis Mason in 1858 as a practical way for canning fresh foods. With its wide mouth, winter beets and summer strawberries could be safely 'preserved' in its tight, vacuum seal. Now add two masterful illusionists –the tag-team of C&K – into the mix, stir up the post-modern visual contexts and *voilà!* Is it a double-entendre, sight gag or paradox of what needs to be lovingly kept from spoilage in our contaminated, toxic world?

Abstracadabra – it's the history of art is transformed into a perfectly 'preserved' set of iconic images flash frozen into their wildly creative original paintings and limited edition prints. If Andy Warhol could transform the banality of soup cans and detergent packages into "Pop" art, and Jeff Koons had the idea of making plastic beach toys of lobsters into

titanium sculptures, then C&K have pushed the post-modernist irony to its ultimate extreme. Art History's heavyweights are each playfully canned. Each jar is filled with the memories of Leonardo, Titian, El Greco, Ingres, Picasso, Matisse, de Kooning, Pollock, Kahlo, Warhol and Lichtenstein and more.

"We are attempting something more real, more intense than reality," Marina explains. Quoting his Parisian comrades – Jean Baudrillard, Umberto Eco, and Marc le Bot – Serge speaks in thickly layered Gallic metaphors. But art of this nature – ponderous, delightously experimental, marvelously creative – needs no pretentious analysis.

In their crammed-packed, richly illustrated book, "The Joy of Art: A Creative Guide for Beginning Painters," [Harry N. Abrams, 2000] C&K propel our vision from the primordial art of the caves to the sublime techniques of the Old Masters. Along this golden road, we learn from their notes and witty illustrations that all great art is comprised of newly invented creative methods.

Studying one of my favorites from the "Jar Memory Project" is a floating nude torso in a sea of puffy clouds against a ceru-

lean blue sky. It was painted by the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte who noted: "Art evokes the mystery without which the world would not exist." And for Serge Clement and Marina Kamena those mysteries are being tightly sealed with their unbelievably UN-canny appeal.

~ INTERVIEW ~

Venü - After a so long journey - with you coming together in life, marriage, and creativity – what prompted you at this moment to create the "Jar Memory Project"?

C&K - Painting was born 25,000 thousand years before writing and we can see it today on the cave's walls of Chauvet, Lascaux, Altamira. Geology invented the first recipients containing human genius. Which words come to our mind then: *Conservation, Preservation*. A jar was there, on the table, and aroused our attention. The term *Conservation* suggests both the museum case and the grocery shelf. Preserving peas in a transparent glass could it be compared to preserving Mona Lisa? Are the caves the first "Jars"? Are the Met, the



Reference Vermeer: Young Girl With Pearls

Louvre, the Prado and the Uffizi big "Jars"?
A word can occasion laughter if it brings together the Wedding at Cana and green peas. Depicting words in the language of illusion using the painting becomes our chosen task.

Venü - Let's go back to the beginning. Serge, tell us about your early life in Paris, what it was like training at l'Ecole des Arts Appliqués and how did that initial philosophy guide the rest of your career?

Serge - I remember the American soldiers in the streets when I arrived in Paris in 1944. The following day, my mother brought me to the Louvre Museum. It was astounding. I had no opinions, I was running to every painting, I loved them all. From that day, I started drawing.

Then, in 1950, I was accepted to the School of Arts Appliqués. Teachers were all great masters. After a training course in each branch I chose the lacquer studio. With Jean Dunan, my teacher participated to the realization of the extraordinary lacquers of the Normandie, still today regarded as the most beautiful boat ever built. She

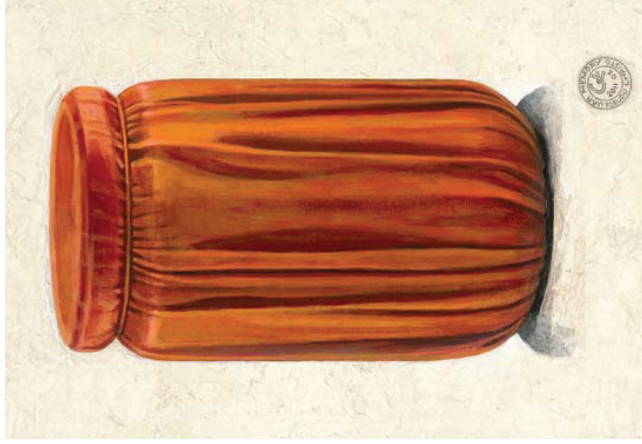


Reference Magritte: La Grande Guerre

in London, Francis Bacon and Giorgio Morandi in Paris. I decided I wanted to paint.

Venü - And after you met, how did this collaboration develop with four eyes, four hands, but one harmonious artistic vision? It's a smooth dance as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers - or it's more a "push-pull" - struggle like most domestic couples? And how do we know who does what, it is your secret, or why is it not really an issue?

C&K - It's impossible to have a common vision of the world and especially in the art field. If it were the case, boredom and sclerosis would have swiped us off. To live and paint in a couple, it's necessary to develop creativity day to day. Strategists who do not boost the game become soloists. "Separati in casa." And being two, painting on a same canvas is neither new, neither peculiar, nor frustrating. Romanticism has created this idea of "lonely creator" in his ivory tower with his painful ego. No doubt there is complicity between Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire in the miracle of their dancing. There is also complicity with four hands and six eyes. [Think of the third eye.]



Reference Christo: Pseudo

Venü - You two are often traveling between Paris and Connecticut on a regular basis. What do you think you are transatlantic artists in that sense - taking the best of both worlds? impulse versus a distinctly American vision?

C&K - Not sure that we can talk of French or American impulsion today. Any traveler will discover walls covered with same tags in New York or in Paris. Major part of contemporary museums is showing the same artists. Contemporary art is global. Internet changes the deal, you can virtually visit shows in different museums in the same time. In the Renaissance, Venice school was very different from Florence or Rome, the distance from one another was important. Today, web erases distances.

It does not change human condition though. What you are, where you are and what you have been taught is a particular cocktail. We think perhaps we would not have started this project in France, but we started it here.

Venü - Of visual arts in our culture today. Would you care to explain how the contemporary art world - or parts of it - are very truthful



Reference Lichtenstein: Alright

intentionality and purpose? Help us understand what these marvelous images - from Ingres to de Kooning - are all about.

C&K - We're the witnesses and the actors of a phenomenal consumption of visuals called "art". Depicting Pompeii, Piero della Francesca, Ingres, Picasso, Robert Rynan, in jars comes from a playful desire to make a break, a cheery confinement to an hysterical movement that has vocation of opening all the windows on the impenetrable mystery of a work of art. To this utopia, we propose another one, based on the words: conservation, memory, patrimony. It confines, in the laps of an intermission, all possible works with no distinction of epoch or style. Our paintings are not imitations but quotations carefully painted. They take on a new visual aspect that our archival project did not quite plan. □

"The Jar Memory Art History Project" will be shown from June 1 - July 31 at Southport Galleries, 330 Pequot Avenue, Southport, CT. For more info: www.southportgalleries.com